

# BROTHERS PAY TRIBUTE TO THE MEN BEHIND MEDALS OF HONOR



The Medal of Honor is the highest award for valor in action. Shown is the Army version, awarded to Valley resident Fred Ferguson, for his actions during the Vietnam War.

BY ANITA MABANTE LEACH

In the late 1970s, Rick Leal was a serviceman whose destiny would soon become intertwined with the heroic deeds of other Latinos who served in the military.

During an event sponsored by the American GI Forum in California, Rick listened as several Medal of Honor recipients spoke about their experiences. Among the honorees was Master Sgt. Roy Benavidez, with whom Leal would later become good friends.

Benavidez had received the medal in recognition of his Loc Ninh, Vietnam battlefield action, during which he rescued, despite being seriously wounded more than 40 times, eight comrades, including his commanding officer.

Leal was inspired by Benavidez's speech and wanted to learn more about other Latinos who had earned the Medal of Honor. He also decided young people should know about the role Hispanics have played in American military action.

"I started putting together all the information. I wrote to the National Archives.... It took me some time," he said.

The time Leal invested was well worth it. The result of his efforts is now an elaborate "photomural" exhibit called *The Legacy of Valor*.

"This is my fourth exhibit, along with the digital photomural." The exhibit features Dr. Hector Perez Garcia, a notable Hispanic civil rights activist and founder of the American G.I. Forum, a now legendary organization that helped protect the civil rights of WWII Hispanic veterans, along with helping them secure basic medical and educational benefits.

A California-based real estate developer, Leal has spent his own money to create the tribute. He also enlisted his brother, David, who owns a Phoenix auto repair shop.

"Wherever it goes, I go," said David Leal. "I volunteer to help wherever (Rick) needs me, I'll be there."

## AIMING TO MOTIVATE KIDS

"It started as a hobby, but I can't stop. I'm into it for about \$50,000," Rick Leal said. "It's been the love of my life."

Leal now is paid by the Army and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) to escort Medal of Honor recipients and his exhibit all over the country. He recently filed to become a non-profit 501C-3 entity.

"My big aim is to bring out to the American

people the tremendous contribution that Hispanics have done in the military. We're part of the American fabric. When the country calls, we're first in, last to leave," he said. "My biggest thing is to talk to school kids and instill some motivation and keep them in school."

Of the 3,459 Medal of Honor recipients in U.S. history, 37 are Hispanic; of that number, 28 Latinos died in battle.

Today there are seven living Latino Medal of Honor recipients, including Silvestre S. Herrera, who resides in Phoenix, and Jay Vargas, who lives in California, but is originally from Winslow, Arizona. Both Herrera and Vargas were among medal recipients honored at a special tribute dinner during the veterans summit Oct. 23 at the Phoenix Civic Plaza. The dinner was the high point of a two-day veterans' summit hosted by the Silvestre S. Herrera LULAC Veterans Council, the Arizona Department of Veterans Services and the City of Phoenix.

## AWARD MAY TAKE YEARS

Some medal recipients may wait years to receive their award, David Leal said. Many wait 50 years or more, although Herrera received his

within five months of his heroism.

The reason for the usual delays?

“Government bureaucracy,” David said. “You’ve got to know the right people. (The nomination) goes to the Department of Defense, to a special committee. That committee takes its time to check everything out and that everything is truthful. Because there is such a huge amount of information about those wars, it takes years to check.”

Ramon Rodriguez, for example, was nominated in 1982 and has not yet received his Medal of Honor. During a 32-month tour of duty in Vietnam, Rodriguez earned three Bronze Stars, five Purple Hearts and most remarkably, three Silver Stars in three days. Yet a crucial clerical error stopped the award process.

“Someone lost his paperwork,” David Leal said. But he’s determined to see that Rodriguez gets recognition. “I’m going to push to get it from the president. I’m just waiting for the election to be over. We brought it up to the Pentagon several months ago.”

No medals have been given for Desert Storm, Afghanistan or current Iraq war action. The last Medals of Honor were awarded posthumously to the families of Gary I. Gordon and Randall D. Shugart. The two were members of Delta Force, also known as Special Forces Operational Detachment Delta, which had been assigned to Mogadishu, Somalia. Their bravery on Oct. 3, 1993 is portrayed in the 2001 film *Blackhawk Down*.

### SHARING HISTORY

The Leals are not alone in sharing the legacy of Medal of Honor recipients. The first convention of the Family and Friends of the Medal of Honor was held Sept. 30 to Oct. 2 in Puebla, Colorado, and PBS is scheduled to air *American Valor*, a documentary about Medal of Honor recipients, at 9 p.m. on Nov. 11, Veterans Day.

While the two brothers support different White House candidates (David roots for Bush, Rick supports Kerry) both agree that sharing the stories of Latino Medal of Honor winners is an important educational and historical endeavor.

“The story is to invigorate and shape those young people that we’re losing by the wayside,” Rick said. “When I see little kids, I talk to them about three things you have to do: 1. Got to love yourself. 2. Have to be yourself. 3. Got to know yourself and have goals in life. (You must) motivate yourself and education is how you’ll do it.”

“For me, it is recognition of our veterans and what they have done for this country to keep us free,” David said. “We’ve got to honor their heroism. They saved a lot of lives. These guys went back and got their friends out. It’s something we cannot forget.”



Legacy of Honor creator, Rick Leal, with Phoenix Medal of Honor recipient Silvestre S. Herrera.

## Roll Call of Latino Medal of Honor recipients, by war or conflict

ERA	BRANCH	DATE OF ACTION
<b>VIETNAM ERA</b>		
Roy P. Benavidez	U.S. Army	5/2/1968
Emilio De La Garza, Jr.	U.S. Marines	4/11/1970
Ralph E. Dias	U.S. Marines	11/12/1969
Daniel Fernandez	U.S. Army	2/18/1965
Alfredo Gonzalez	U.S. Marines	2/4/1968
Jose Francisco Jimenez	U.S. Marines	8/28/1969
Miguel Keith	U.S. Marines	5/8/1970
Carlos James Lozada	U.S. Army	11/20/1967
Joseph R. Rocco	U.S. Army	5/24/1970
Alfred V. Rascon	U.S. Army	3/16/1966
Euripedes Rubio	U.S. Army	11/8/1966
Hector Santiago-Colon	U.S. Army	6/28/1968
Jay R. Vargas	U.S. Marines	4/30/1968
Maximo Yabes	U.S. Army	2/26/1967
Humberto R. Versace	U.S. Army	10/29/1963
<b>KOREAN CONFLICT</b>		
Reginald A. Disiderio	U.S. Army	11/27/1950
Fernando L. Garcia	U.S. Marines	9/5/1952
Edward Gomez	U.S. Marines	9/14/1951
Ambrosio Guillen	U.S. Marines	7/25/1953
Rodolfo P. Hernandez	U.S. Army	5/31/1951
Baldomero Lopez	U.S. Marines	9/15/1950
Benito Martinez	U.S. Army	9/6/1952
Eugene Arnold Obregon	U.S. Marines	9/26/1953
Joseph C. Rodriguez	U.S. Army	5/21/1951
<b>WORLD WAR II</b>		
Lucian Adams	U.S. Army	10/23/1944
Marcario Garcia	U.S. Army	11/27/1944
Harold Gonsalves	U.S. Marines	4/15/1945
David M. Gonzales	U.S. Army	4/25/1945
Silvestre H. Herrera	U.S. Army	3/15/1945
Jose M. Lopez	U.S. Army	12/17/1944
Joseph P. Martinez	U.S. Army	5/26/1943
Manuel Perez, Jr.	U.S. Army	2/13/1945
Cleto Rodriguez	U.S. Army	2/9/1945
Alejandro R. Ruiz	U.S. Army	4/28/1945
Jose F. Valdez	U.S. Army	1/25/1945
Ysmael R. Villegas	U.S. Army	3/20/1945
<b>WORLD WAR I</b>		
David Barkley (Cantu)	U.S. Army	11/9/1918
<b>BOXER REBELLION</b>		
France Silva	U.S. Marines	6/25/1900
<b>CIVIL WAR</b>		
Philip Bazaar	U.S. Navy	6/15/1865
John Ortega	U.S. Navy	12/31/1864

Sources: U.S. Department of Defense, [www.homeofheroes.com](http://www.homeofheroes.com), and *U.S. Latino Patriots: From the American Revolution to Afghanistan, An Overview*, by Refugio I. Rochin and Lionel Fernandez, Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives.

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